

Message Text

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71

ACTION ARA-10

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-04 H-02 INR-07 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-05 PA-01 PRS-01 SP-02 SS-15 USIA-06 CU-02

/059 W

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R 091755Z SEP 76

FM AMEMBASSY PORT OF SPAIN

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9680

INFO AMEMBASSY BRIDGETOWN

AMEMBASSY CARACAS

AMEMBASSY GEORGETOWN

AMEMBASSY KINGSTON

AMEMBASSY PARAMARIBO

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E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: PINT, TD

SUBJECT: A PEACEFUL ELECTION CAMPAIGN.

REF: PORT OF SPAIN 2275

1. THE ELECTION CAMPAIGN IN TRINIDAD AND TOBAGO THIS YEAR HAS SO FAR BEEN RELATIVELY CALM AND HAS BEEN FREE FROM VIOLENCE AND INTIMIDATION. MOST OF THE CAMPAIGN HAS CENTERED ON THE COMPETENCE AND HONESTY OF THE RULE OF THE PEOPLE'S NATIONAL MOVEMENT (PNM) FOR THE PAST TWENTY YEARS AND THE SERIOUS AND FRIVOLOUS ALTERNATIVE POLICIES AND PERSONALITIES WHO WOULD TAKE CHARGE OF THE COUNTRY FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS. WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE CHARGES BY SOME MODERATE OPPOSITION PARTIES THAT THE UNITED LABOUR FRONT (ULF) IS A "COMMUNIST" PARTY WHICH WOULD BRING RUIN TO THE COUNTRY IF ELECTED, THE CONTESTING PARTIES HAVE STEERED AWAY FROM EXTREME ACCUSATIONS AND ALSO FROM INVOLVING RACIAL CONSIDERATIONS.

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2. IN ADDITION TO THE STRONGLY-ROOTED DEMOCRATIC TRADITIONS OF THE COUNTRY, A MAJOR FACTOR IN KEEPING THE ELECTION PEACEFUL HAS BEEN THE WIDESPREAD APATHY OF THE VOTING PUBLIC, ESPECIALLY THE 18-21 YEAR OLDS WHO WERE JUST GIVEN THE RIGHT TO VOTE. WITH NO SINGLE ALTERNATIVE PARTY TO UNITE AND GALVANIZE ANTI-GOVERNMENT AND ANTI-PNM SENTIMENT, THE BADLY-FRAGMENTED OPPOSITION HAS BEEN HARD-PRESSED TO WHIP UP ENTHUSIASM FOR ITS OWN EFFORTS, MUCH LESS CREATE THE PARTISAN HOSTILITY WHICH COULD LEAD TO ACTS OF VIOLENCE. ALL PARTIES APPEAR TO BE PLAYING WITHIN THE RULES AT THIS STAGE.

3. TRINIDADIAN ELECTIONS ARE NOT YET DOMINATED BY THE THE MEDIA. FACE-TO-FACE MEETINGS BETWEEN CANDIDATES AND VOTERS, AT STREET-CORNER MEETINGS, IN PRIVATE HOMES AND AT MASS RALLIES ARE STILL THE PRIMARY MEANS USED TO PERSUADE THE PUBLIC. THESE MEETINGS HAVE, FOR THE MOST PART, BEEN PEACEFUL AND RESTRAINED. TELEVISION APPEARANCES BY POLITICIANS (ASIDE FROM NEWS REPORTS OF THE "NON-POLITICAL" ACTIVITIES OF THE GOVERNMENT) HAVE BEEN RESTRICTED TO ONE FIFTEEN-MINUTE SPEECH BY THE POLITICAL LEADER OF EACH PARTY FIELDING MORE THAN 22 CANDIDATES IN THE ELECTION. SEVEN OF THE NINE PARTIES QUALIFIED, BUT ONE -THE ULF - DECIDED NOT TO PARTICIPATE TO PROTEST THE DECISION OF THE STATION'S GOVERNMENT-APPOINTED BOARD TO ALLOW THE GOVERNING PNM AN EXTRA BROADCAST AT THE END OF THE SERIES.

4. THE TELEVISION SPEAKERS WERE REQUIRED TO SUBMIT TEXTS OF THEIR SPEECHES IN ADVANCE AND TO TAPE THEIR DELIVERIES TO ENSURE THAT THE SPEECHES WERE NOT INCENDIARY, DEFAMATORY OR MALICIOUS. WHILE THIS PROCEDURE OPENED THE GOVERNMENT TO CHARGES OF CENSORSHIP, NONE OF THE PARTIES HAVE COMPLAINED ABOUT THE WAY THE SPEECHES WERE BROADCAST OR HAVE ALLEGED ANY ACTUAL ATTEMPT AT CENSORSHIP. THE CONTROLLED STUDIO SETTING IMPOSED ON THE TELEVISION APPEARANCES HAS RESULTED IN RELATIVELY STIFF, ARTIFICIAL (AND BORING) PERFORMANCES BY MOST THE POLITICAL LEADERS, LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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HOWEVER.

5. IN ADDITION TO THE FREE APPEARANCES ON TELEVISION, ALL OF THE PARTIES WERE ELIGIBLE FOR AND HAVE AVOIDED THEMSELVES OF FREE BROADCAST TIME ON EITHER OR BOTH THE GOVERNMENT-OWNED AND THE PRIVATE RADIO STATIONS. PRIVATELY-OWNED RADIO TRINIDAD HAS ALSO SOLD AIR TIME TO THE PARTIES. THE DAILY PRESS HAS GIVEN

REASONABLY EVEN-HANDED TREATMENT TO THE MAJOR
CONTESTING PARTIES IN ITS NEWS COLUMNS. WITH THE
EXCEPTION OF AN ENDORSEMENT OF TAPIA BY AN "EXPRESS"
COLUMNIST AND REPEATED DENUNCIATIONS OF THE ULF BY
THE EDITORIAL WRITERS AND COLUMNISTS OF THE
"GUARDIAN", MOST OF THE OPINIONS EXPRESSED ON THE
EDITORIAL PAGES OF BOTH NEWSPAPERS HAVE BEEN TO
ENCOURAGE RESPONSIBLE ATTITUDES BY THE PARTIES AND
CONSIDERED JUDGEMENT BY VOTERS. THE CONSERVATIVE
BUT SENSATIONALIST WEEKLY "BOMB" HAS TAKEN LIVELY
DELIGHT IN LAMBASTING THE "COMMUNIST" ULF AND
DENIGRATING THE CHANCES OF MOST OF THE OTHER
OPPOSITION PARTIES.

6. THE VOTING IN THIS ELECTION WILL BE BY PAPER BALLOTS
UNDER THE SUPERVISION OF AN INDEPENDENT
ELECTIONS COMMISSION. ALL CANDIDATES WILL BE
PERMITTED TO HAVE POLL WATCHERS PRESENT DURING THE
VOTING AND WHEN THE BALLOTS ARE COUNTED TO ENSURE
FAIRNESS.

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